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## A SCHOOL COURSE IN DRAMATICS

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The newspapers recently noted the fact that the Methodist church at its national conference this year again endeavored to remove that objectionable clause in its discipline relative to prohibitory amusements, notably the theater. The strength of sentiment and conviction expressed would argue ultimate success. This discussion is but one of the many signs of the times that the drama is coming into its own. Dramatic schools, courses in play-writing in the colleges and correspondence schools, endowed theaters, the multiplicity of playhouses, increasing attendance, more intelligent criticism of plays by the press, censorship, books and articles on the drama by the ton, and greater moral and intellectual responsibilities on the part of managers in serving the public, testify to the universality of the dramatic instinct, its powerful moral and intellectual stimuli, and its unlimited social service. With the press, the pulpit, fiction, and public office, the drama at last claims and maintains equal place. Why not, then, give it formal recognition in education?

In all the educational palaver that is going on, one thing must be kept strictly in mind. Adolescence requires everything worth while that will fit it to meet the complex demands of the age. Let us face the facts. Social and home conditions today make it almost impossible for a youth to help himself. Everything conceivable is done for him, thought out for him, placed in his possession. Study is irksome and unnecessary. His many hours of recreation are filled at the theater, vaudeville, moving-picture show, the card table, with a novel, in out-of-door sports, and at the dance-hall. The public schools are censured because they do not combat this, are blamed because they do not make graduates walking encyclopedias, lightning calculators, and models of business behavior, while at the same time they are flayed for trying to meet present conditions of living.

It is obvious, then, that the core of the criticism at present directed against the public-school system is that it does not "produce the goods." The merchant complains that a high-school employee is not punctual, tidy, industrious, or alert. The lawyer argues that his embryo successor is slow of thinking and speech, forgetful, not enterprising. The school superintendent laments that the young teacher is vague, shoddy in scholarship, lacking in tact and sympathy. The manufacturer does not want the boy who is too superior to work with his hands; and if he places him on a stool he finds that he cannot figure or spell, and, in general, is made of putty, not phosphate. It would seem, then, that the public demands of its schools not only mental training, but moral judgments and active personalities. And it should. The age calls for it, despite the inconsistent air of superiority the critics assume who were trained merely in the "Three R's."

Clearly, then, of these three processes—training of mind, instilling of moral judgment, and cultivation of personality—the last is most important. Scholarship without tact will not make a teacher. A good speller with no sympathy will not make a nurse. A clever accountant with no enterprise will never become the head of a firm. Honor grades in English literature, but no social charm or intelligence, will not make a girl useful and attractive in home or community. The valedictorian who does not understand men is not wanted. In general, we look to the men of virile personalities rather than of mere intellect when the city or the state is in a crisis. Industry may make a well-ordered brain; but it takes industry and intelligence to make personality. The duty of the public schools is plain: to develop live, forceful, attractive personalities.

There are many means to that end. Foremost, of course, is the influence of the teacher's personality. Many a teacher of average scholarship is effective because of an abundance of human nature. Public debates, declamation contests, school patronage of the pupils' social life, athletics, class and school organizations of all kinds—all these are legitimate agencies in supplementing mental training with the development of personality. Many schools have come to recognize the value of dramatics to this end. Too many pervert its function to tawdry entertainment; some few

take it too seriously. But there are still many live, influential schools that look at the matter with indifference, or, at least, take it as a matter of course. Unfortunately there are some classes of people left who look with disfavor on this plan of harnessing play with work—misguided church people, quasi-public-spirited newspaper editors, parents whose own lack of discipline has produced flighty children, and school boards wedded to the “Three R’s.”

What, then, can school dramatics do? A systematic course in dramatics will develop in the pupil resourcefulness, a knowledge of human life, and altruism.

Teachers complain that pupils cannot or will not think for themselves. They are slow to help themselves to knowledge, depend too much on the teacher to blaze the way, and are much slower to act. They do not see the relation of their studies; they do not apply theories to practice. Probably this is the fault of a textbook pedagogy, but it is just as much a by-product of the spirit of the age. When the pupil is assigned a part in a play, and brings to bear all his energy and understanding to make the most of it, his resourcefulness is taxed to the utmost. If it does not make him exercise initiative and enterprise in illuminating his part with interest and force; if it does not open his eyes to a wide range of personal habits, mannerisms, and all that makes a man’s genius count among men; if it does not give him discriminating taste, alertness, mental grasp, poise of body and mind, nothing else will.

More than this is the knowledge of human nature gained and applied. If we want our pupils to be honest, let them study the part of the liar, the thief, or the hypocrite; if we want them virtuous, let them portray the evil-doer; if free from cant, sweet of manner, tolerant in judgment, and sympathetic, let them exhibit the traits of the prig, the snob, the “grouch,” the pedant, the recluse, the cynic, and the miser—stingy of purse and self. Add to these moral considerations, correctness of judgment, concentration of mind, initiative, independence, and unselfishness, not the least important.

Contrary to popular impression, school dramatics breeds the highest good spirit and altruism. A football team or a class organization cannot be run without teamwork; neither can school

dramatics. Each pupil can be made to see and feel this. Therefore, the work should never be committed wholly to an undergraduate organization. An English teacher should be engaged capable of doing this work; or where elocution is a regular course, such a teacher should be able to direct this work. He should control and dominate the organization, conduct preliminary trials, assign parts, direct rehearsals, manage the production, and be always in evidence, the head and inspiration of it all.

But he must make his pupils feel that above all the training in effective personality is the dominant note of altruism. Everyone must pull together; there must be no dissatisfaction over parts assigned. Pupils must feel that a certain part was assigned to a certain pupil because that pupil was best adapted to simulating such a character. If they believe they are fitted for other rôles, they must show, by study and application, that they understand the parts. They must realize that their part is a necessary element in the entire product, not to be slighted or omitted, but vital, impressive, and consequential. This sort of spirit produces the best ensemble, and gives the pupils one of the main benefits to be derived.

Another aspect of this altruistic spirit must consist in the object in producing plays. Many schools go to great expense in staging productions, but gain no financial reward. The plays are given for social diversion, as features of holiday or commencement festivities. In such schools the merits of dramatics are not considered, and the type of plays given is usually for mere entertainment. Often what money is earned is spent in repleting class treasuries—an indefensible proceeding—or in giving class banquets. Why not make the matter a solid financial proposition as well as an educational and artistic one? The classes or dramatic clubs can be taught useful lessons in civics by having some ulterior, beneficial project in mind, such as decorating the school walls, buying books, apparatus, athletic equipment, or providing for musicals and lecture courses. Each class can then go on record as a broad-minded, large-spirited set of young people, ambitious to leave their school some testimony of their appreciation of its services to them. The Senior classes of the school which the writer represents give the

proceeds of their annual Senior play for such purposes. The popularity of the "Senior class play" has grown so that each class has no difficulty in filling a local theater for two and sometimes three performances. In a period of seven years, about \$3,000 has been added to the school's funds, with the result that the high school now has its walls amply decorated with paintings, busts, and frescoes, and its library increased. Moreover, the funds for a pipe organ and an athletic field were materially increased from this source, and both made possible. What this high school can accomplish others can.

This article will be of little value unless it offers some practical suggestions as to methods of employing material in the classes, convenient times of production, and types of plays to be used.

In a course of dramatics, something can be done each year in all the classes. The writer has found from experience that classes get the most from such classics as *The Lady of the Lake*, *Ivanhoe*, *The Princess*, *Silas Marner*, *The Tale of Two Cities*, etc., if certain recitations are given over to dramatized forms of these works. This can be done by the teacher, or often by the more mature pupils as exercises in English composition. No pretense at costume or scenery need be made in these brief dialogues. But often an entire review of the classic can be made by the pupils enacting certain episodes, the teacher filling in by reading aloud connecting parts. If the school possesses a good workable platform capable of stage adaptation, let the various classes compete in this incidental work and later on in the year give a complete performance of some dramatization before the school. This sort of work can be pursued in each class, the range of work varying from Longfellow's "Miles Standish" to Tennyson's "The Falcon." Of course such work should be kept within the limits of school conditions. But the teacher can keep a record of the varying abilities of his pupils, and when they become Seniors—if it is the custom of the Senior class to give the great annual play—the material will be at hand to be drawn from. If the school prefers a dramatic club, membership should be limited to the upper classes. But the material can be provided for in the same way. One or two works a year can be produced, according to the convenience of the school; one play should be "light," the other "heavy." Obviously, the

school will try to avail itself of the best possible natural conditions; it will stage the production at a local theater, if possible, and secure the best assistance in stage management, costuming, properties, etc. But with a little study, all these details can be managed by teachers.

Let me close this paper with a brief list of plays that I have found available in the past, both from actual use and from the use of others. If any teacher contemplates using any of them, and wishes more information, I will gladly furnish it.

One year we gave a condensed version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the school orchestra playing Mendelssohn's music throughout. *The American Citizen*, by Ryley, is a good modern comedy. *The Burglar*, by Cameron, furnishes light fun, but takes skill. Many schools play Ibsen's *A Doll's House* with skill and discernment. Robertson's *David Garrick* has merit in no small degree; likewise *The Rivals*, of Sheridan, and *She Stoops to Conquer* of Goldsmith. W. D. Howell's farces are good for incidental purposes, as are the following: *Lend Me Five Shillings*, by Morton; *High C*, by Rosenfel; *Ici on parle Français*, by Williams; *Two Strings to Her Bow*, by Harrison; and *Mistress Penelope*, by Marble. Of the shorter plays more serious in nature may be mentioned *The Blind Girl of Castel Cuille*, by Longfellow; *The Land of Heart's Desire*, by Yeats; *Gringoire*, by Shirley; and *The Violin Maker of Cremona*, by Coppée. Among the good comedies may be noted *Mrs. Compton's Manager*, by Osgood; *Nephew or Uncle*, by Abbott; *Walker, London*, by Barrie; *The Butterflies*, by Carleton; and *Mice and Men*, by Ryley. *A Scrap of Paper*, by Simpson, and *The Private Secretary*, by Hawtry, are overworked and overdrawn. In fact, little good can come in school work from farces, strained estimates of human nature, or forced effects. Belasco's *May Blossom*, *Fanchion*, *The Cricket*, of Waldamer, and *Little Em'ly*, a dramatization of *David Copperfield*, make good straight dramas. By all means, avoid the works of Pinero, Clyde Fitch, and Jones. These writers picture unsavory life, unnecessary conditions, and, on the whole, are above the immature mind. But, keeping to the kind outlined above—and there are many more plays possible of presentation—the best purposes of school dramatics will be conserved.